Deconstructing language myths: which languages of learning and teaching in South Africa?

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Abstract

In this article we argue for the use of African languages as Languages of Learning and Teaching (LoLT) for native speakers of such language in South Africa. We believe that both public and academic debate is influenced by a set of 'language myths': 1) only one language should be used; 2) the earlier one starts using English as LoLT, the better; 3) using English as LoLT improves English proficiency. These myths be seen as a direct manifestation of Western hegemony, and English-functional arguments are often the terms of reference. We will try a different approach by highlighting the advantages of using an African language (i.e. isiXhosa) as LoLT and, whenever possible, we will try to put English on the 'defence stand'. The purpose of this paper is not to advocate the substitution of English with an African language. We believe that bilingual education is the appropriate choice for South Africa, but in order to achieve full equality between English and the African languages in education, arguments in support of the latter must be put forward proactively. With our paper, we hope to contribute to this new perspective.

Introduction

In terms of language in education policy, the model used by speakers of powerful languages such as Russian, Chinese, French, Finnish, Afrikaans and English for that matter is mother tongue education coupled with the study of a second language (in most cases, English). In South Africa, the current policy for speakers of African languages has remained virtually unchanged since 1979. Most African students are expected to learn in their mother tongue up to grade four, and in either English or Afrikaans henceforth (Kamwangamalu, 2001). This approach can be classified as transitional bilingual education. It is not very different from one designed for an immigrant child in an English-speaking country such as the US. The linguistic situation of South Africa is, however, radically different from that of Western English-speaking countries.

For historical reasons, language in education policy and practice is a contentious issue (Webb and Kembo-Sure, 2000; Alexander 2001). The policy

developed under apartheid was an integral part of Bantu Education. Such policy was not informed by linguistic considerations, was not shaped by pedagogical considerations and, arguably, was not drafted for the empowerment of speakers of an African language. It is difficult to imagine how a model which was explicitly designed to enforce discrimination against speakers of an African language can now be used to promote equality and support economic and social development. Besides attempts to change the curriculum (met with mixed feeling by both teachers and students), not much has changed in the education system since the end of apartheid. Funding and infrastructure in most rural and township schools remains inadequate and most teachers were trained under Bantu Education.

The dominant role of English in the education of speakers of an African language is entrenched by a number of factors. English hegemony is supported by the demands of the global economy (see Wright, 2007). With reference to immigrant communities in Canada, Peirce (1995) argues that learning to function in a powerful language such as English represents an investment in what the author calls 'cultural capital'. Proficiency in such a language is a key to social integration and upward mobility. As noted by Pattanayak (1986), in developing countries the use of former colonial languages serves the interests of westernised elites than that of the majority of the population. To our knowledge, there is little empirical evidence that the past and current investment in English 'cultural capital' enables the majority of speakers of an African language to participate meaningfully in the global economy.

Language attitudes supporting the dominant role of English, both within the education system and in society as a whole, seem to indirectly contribute to the marginalisation of African languages. In a democratic country like South Africa, where language policy has to take all stakeholders into account, this has important implications. In this sense, English linguistic hegemony contributes to shaping important political decisions regarding the LoLT issue, which have real practical implications for speakers of an African language. The issue seems to have lost momentum over the last decade. We feel it should be brought back to the fore with renewed vigour.

In this paper, we start by deconstructing some of the language 'myths' which are often used in public and academic debate to support the current English-mainly policy. We then use isiXhosa, a previously marginalised indigenous African language widely spoken in the Eastern Cape provinces (Statistics South Africa, 2001), as an example to address various concerns associated with the use of African languages in education. In doing so, we loosely follow

Phillipson's (1992) taxonomy of intrinsic, extrinsic and functional arguments, bearing in mind their linguistic, educational and ideological implications.

Deconstructing some language myths

Language in education issues have been the topic of extensive research on language attitudes, broader academic literature and public debate in the media (De Klerk and Bosch, 1993; Kamwangamalu, 2001; De Klerk, 2000a, 2000b; Wolff, 2002; Dalvit, 2004, Aziakpono, 2008). Three English-functional myths emerge, which support the exclusion of African languages from education: 1) only one language should be used; 2) the earlier one starts using English as LoLT, the better; 3) using English as LoLT improves English proficiency.

Monolingual vs. bilingual education

As pointed out by Alexander (2001), the European romantic ideal of 'one nation, one language' still has a strong appeal in South Africa. The belief that, in order to be modern, peaceful and efficient, a country must have only one language is a simplification contradicted by evidence and common sense. In Europe itself, Switzerland, Belgium and Finland are successful examples of societal multilingualism. It is also worth noting that, while the study of English as a *lingua franca* for international and (in some cases) national communication is widespread, none of these countries use it as LoLT (McRae, 1997). Mgqashu (2004) highlights the different history and context of multilingual countries in Europe and Africa. This is an important point to bear in mind when drawing on European examples of language planning. In terms of the debate between advocates of multilingualism and bilingualism, however, such examples confirm that, under the appropriate circumstances, a multilingual approach can be successful.

An English-mainly or English-only educational policy seems unsuitable for South Africa. The reality of a multilingual African country is radically different from that of a predominantly monolingual country in the developed World. An exemplifying paradox is that an isiXhosa-speaking child in South Africa is supposed to go through the same model of transitional bilingual education as a Spanish-speaking child in California (see Baker, 2006), i.e. complete switch to English after the first phase.

Posing the question on LoLT in terms of a clear cut choice between English and isiXhosa implies the assumption that they cannot be used together and that ultimately only one language should be used. Research on the language attitudes of speakers of an African language from different educational backgrounds and at different levels in the education system (Smit, 1996; De Klerk, 2000; Bekker, 2002; Dalvit, 2004) shows that, whenever prompted with a clear-cut choice between English and an African language, most parents and students opt for the language they feel would empower them the most, i.e. English. Braam (2004), however, argues that, when students and their parents are well informed, they do not necessarily support an English-only policy. Asking 'to what extent should English and isiXhosa be used?' adds depth and complexity, and allows for a more comprehensive picture of the complex scenario students might have in mind. As noted by Bekker (2002), Dalvit (2004) and Aziakpoho (2008) enabling respondents to indicate the most in appropriate language for particular levels of study (primary, secondary, tertiary); subjects (sciences vs humanities) and domains (lessons, discussions, tutorials and practicals) highlights areas of support for the use of African languages in education.

A more extensive use of African languages as LoLT would reflect more accurately the multilingual reality of many speakers of an African language. According to the official policy, most African students who write Matriculation exams have been exposed to English as the only official LoLT and assessment for at least eight years (Holmarsdottir, 2005; Kamwangamalu, 2001). However, code-switching between English and the students' mother tongue is the norm rather than the exception in many rural and township schools (Heugh, 2000; Holmarsdottir, 2005; Kamwangamalu, 2001; Maake, 1994; Szanton, 2005; Simango, 2009). A teacher would normally interact with the students orally in a common African language, while referring to English books and using English subject-specific terminology.

Using isiXhosa as an additional LoLT could be seen as a formalisation of what is already the students' experience. Setati and Adler (2000, p.255) note how teachers are caught in the "dilemma of code-switching": using students' mother tongue to make communication possible while feeling the responsibility to teach in English. Teachers seemed to feel 'liberated' when the researchers endorsed the pedagogical value of the code-switching they commonly used in classroom practice (Setati and Adler, 2000).

African students are put in a somewhat paradoxical situation. In common practice, both English and their mother tongue are effectively used as

languages of learning and teaching for most of their study career. However, since grade four, English is the only official language of assessment (Holmarsdottir, 2005; Kamwangamalu, 2001). In the mind of many speakers of an African language, the code-switching which takes place in many schools for speakers of English as a second language is associated with the poor quality of education in such schools (Wolff, 2002). Such association is exemplified by the common reference to rural and township schools in terms of the African language spoken by the students (e.g. 'isiXhosa-medium schools'), although English is actually the official LoLT in most such schools. Association with poor quality is a deterrent from using such languages in education. When given a choice, it is not surprising that they would opt for the monolingual English education enjoyed by English speakers (see Kamwangamalu, 2001; De Klerk, 2000a, 2000b). The use of both English and an African language should be equally supported. Bilingual education *de facto* reflects the practice in many rural and township schools and the multilingual reality of many speakers of an African language.

Early transition to English

In post-apartheid South Africa, there is a tendency among members of the emerging African middle class to enrol their children in schools where English is taught as a first language, and that were previously reserved for individuals classified as 'whites'. The assumption among advocates of an early switch to English seems to be that if an isiXhosa-speaking child uses only English in school like English-speaking children do, he or she will be as successful as them. According to various authors (De Klerk and Bosch, 1993; Kamwangamalu, 2001; De Klerk, 2000a, 2000b; Wolff, 2002; Dalvit, 2004; Aziakpono, 2008), African students and their parents support an early switch to English as the only LoLT. They believe this would give them better opportunities in life for further education and future employment.

This belief is probably supported by the commonsensical observation that African children who attend schools where English is the only LoLT since the beginning tend to have better life chances than their counterparts who attend rural and township schools where English is taught as a second language. The association between the use of English as LoLT and better life chances raises three types of objections. First of all, one could argue that better quality of education rather than the use of English as LoLT in schools for speakers of English as a first language determines better academic results and ultimately

better life chances. Secondly, a more thorough investigation is needed on the differences between African students who attend schools for speakers of English as a first, as opposed to a second language. If, as commonsensical observation would suggest, the former generally come from a more affluent background that would explain their better academic performance and life chances. Supporters of very different approaches to the LoLT issue (Borg and Borg, Buttigieg and Mayo, 2002; Boughey, 2007) agree that students from a privileged background are more likely to achieve academic success and high-status in society. A third objection to the association between early switch to English as LoLT and better performance among speakers of an African language is that this might hold only to a limited extent in the South African context. Research (Negash, 2002; Dalvit, in press) would suggest that speakers of an African language who attended schools for speakers of English as first language do not perform as well as native speakers of English, even in technical subjects such as Accounting or Computer Science. Among speakers of an African language, those who attended schools for speakers of English as a second language perform as well, if not better, than the others from the second year onwards.

The claim that early switch to English as LoLT does not entail better academic performance is supported by educational theory. Sweetnam-Evans (2001) advocates that maintenance or late transitional bilingual education is more likely to lead to academic success across the board than education in a second language forced on students by the circumstances. Mahlalela-Thusi and Heugh (2002) support this point. These authors note that in the transition between the first phase of Bantu Education (when African languages were used for the first eight years of schooling) and the second phase (when the years of mother-tongue instruction were reduced to four), there was a drastic drop in the matriculation pass rates. Since matriculation exams were written in either English or Afrikaans throughout, this seems to support both the claim that prolonged instruction in one's mother tongue offers cognitive advantages and that bilingual education leads to better performance.

Although much of the literature on early switch to English is somewhat out of date, as noted in the introduction, not much has changed in the last few decades. Walters (1996) argues that pupils are not trained in English well enough to use it as LoLT before the shift takes place. MacDonald (1990) agrees that the shift happens too early. She notes the discrepancy between the vocabulary of English words pupils have learnt by the end of fourth grade (800) and the one required for fifth grade (5 000). Other authors (Szanton, 2005; Wolff, 2002; Holmarsdottir, 2005) argue that low standards and high

drop-out rates in many rural and township schools might be due, among other things, to the early transition to a LoLT many students are not familiar with.

The difficulties experienced by speakers of an African language can be explained in terms of the psycholinguistic theory concerning the relationship between first and second language in education elaborated by Cummins (1986). This distinguishes between 'basic interpersonal communicative skills' (BICS) and 'cognitive/academic language proficiency' (CALP). Cummins claims that the two languages of a bilingual can develop independently up to the BICS level, but at the CALP level they work inter-dependently. This means that, in a decontextualised and cognitively demanding situation, the level of CALP in the second language depends on its stage of development in the first language. A failure in the development of CALP in the first language inhibits the acquisition of academic language skills in the second language. This is known as the interdependence hypothesis.

Two studies form Tanzania yield contradicting results on the use of Kiswahili as additional LoLT. While Mgqashu (2004) found that the use of an African language as LoLT disadvantaged students, Brock-Utne (2007) found that it encouraged active participation. With reference to studies in the South African context, Luckett (1995, p.75) notes that

> Many Black pupils could not explain in English what they already knew in their first languages; nor could they transfer into their first languages the new knowledge that they had learnt through English. In other words, they found that pupils had failed to achieve CALP in either language.

Later studies (Setati, Adler, Reed and Bapoo, 2002) seem to suggest that African students *do* use their mother tongue (together with English) for exploratory talk and mathematics conceptual discourse. The above paragraph could therefore be reinterpreted as indicating that the understanding students achieved through code-switching between English and their mother tongue could not be assessed using either of the two languages in isolation.

Using English as LoLT improves English proficiency

A strong argument against the use of African languages in education is that it would prevent students from achieving proficiency in English. Once again, this might be based more on the association between code-switching and low levels of English proficiency in many rural and township schools, rather than on pedagogical considerations.

Baker (2006) discusses Cummins's theory, highlighting that instruction through the home language does not prevent the development of academic proficiency in a second language. On the contrary, according to the interdependence hypothesis, once academic proficiency is developed in one language, it can be transferred to another, given enough motivation and exposure to the target language. Sweetnam-Evans (2001) notes that students who are not taught entirely in English are likely to have higher levels of English proficiency than those who are taught only in English, provided that they have opportunities to practice it. Using English as the sole LoLT, on the other hand, does not necessarily improve one's proficiency in it.

The South African example clearly shows that a language policy favouring the use of English as LoLT does not guarantee higher levels of English proficiency. Since 1979, most African children have been officially taught only in English from fourth grade onwards. In spite of this, according to Webb (1996), less than 25 per cent of the South African black population has a reasonable competence in English. Gough (1996) quotes a number of other studies on English proficiency among black South Africans, with figures (depending obviously on the definition of *proficiency*) ranging from 61 per cent (SABC, 1993) to 32 per cent (Schuring, 1993).

Although these figures refer to research conducted over a decade ago, to our knowledge little has changed in the education system (see Heugh, 2000), nor is there a clear indication of an increase in English proficiency among speakers of an African language. There are a number of reasons for this. Most black children, especially in rural areas, have very little contact with English outside the school. Setati *et al*. (2002) speculate that this could explain why teachers in rural areas expressed particularly negative attitudes towards code-switching, since the classroom is the only domain where students are exposed to English and have a chance to practice it.

Another possible reason for low levels of English proficiency is that teachers themselves (most of whom have been trained under Bantu Education) are not necessarily proficient in the language (Webb, 1996). While code-switching in the classroom is often blamed for low levels of English proficiency, a pragmatic approach would acknowledge the fact that, under present circumstances, using English as the sole LoLT in rural and township schools is simply impracticable.

Intrinsic arguments

According to Phillipson (1992), intrinsic arguments refer to 'what a language *is*', i.e. to its inherent properties as a language. From the linguistic point of view, African languages are equal to English and like any other language, can be used to express a variety of ideas. In this section we discuss the advantages of isiXhosa over English from the structural point of view as well as from the point of view of modernisation, which is a crucial issue with reference to the use of a language in education.

Language structure

The spelling and grammar of African languages are much simpler than the English ones. In spite of the potential implications for the use of African languages as LoLT, the comparison between the spelling and grammar of English and African languages is hardly ever mentioned in the academic debate and in research on language attitudes.

Unlike African languages, English does not have a phonetic spelling. The discrepancy between the way English words are written and the way they are pronounced is problematic both for first and second language speakers (Spencer, 2002; Birch, 2007). On a more general note, it is ironic that English, which is considered the main language of scientific and technological innovation, relies on an archaic and opaque spelling (Carter, 2006). Indigenous South Africa languages have been standardised in relatively recent times (see Smit, 1996; Webb and Kembo-Sure, 2000) partly as a result of this, in African languages the way words are written corresponds quite accurately to the way they are pronounced. Arguably, this makes it easier to acquire basic literacy in any of them than in English.

The different structure of African languages compared to English might cause problems in scientific discourse. For example, the African languages make little use of logical connectives, which are a common feature of scientific writing. African languages do not use the English articles 'the' and 'a', hence 'copper is *a* metal which conducts electricity' and 'copper is *the* metal which conducts electricity' could cause confusion when written in an African language (Grayson, cited in Finlayson and Madiba, 2002, p.48).

One might respond to these criticisms by pointing out that English is also

ambiguous in some cases. As a counter-example, the sentence 'copper is the metal in the cable which conducts electricity' does not clearly indicate whether the conductor is copper, metal or cable. Its equivalent in isiXhosa is not ambiguous, since different nouns belong to different classes. For instance, in 'ikopolo sisinyithi esikumbhobho *sihambisa* umbane' the use of 'sihambisa instead of 'ohambisa' indicates that the metal conducts electricity, and not the cable. This is an example of a distinction which is useful in making further inferences (e.g. a metal plate conducts electricity, but an empty plastic cable does not), and which is marked linguistically in an African language but not in English.

Technical terminology

One of the critiques levelled to the use of African languages in education is their alleged lack of appropriate terminology. Wolff (2002) attributes the underdevelopment of African languages to the early switch to English as LoLT. In fact, a language can develop fully only through use, particularly as LoLT in advanced levels of education.

The possibility of using terminology from the apartheid era is somewhat controversial. On one hand, Heugh (2000) notes that the terminology developed during the first phase of Bantu Education (1953–1976), when African languages were used as media of instruction for the first eight years of school, is still there and is continually adapted in the code-switching that still takes place in rural and township schools today. She argues that such terminology could be revived and further developed for academic use. On the other hand, one must consider that under apartheid corpus planning for the African languages was often informed by the interests of the government rather than those of the relevant language communities. New terms were developed simply to support the façade of official status in the former homelands (Van Huyssteen, 2003). The result was general bad quality of the terminology developed, which might account for the difficulties in promoting the use of new terminology in the African languages.

In the New South Africa, the work of apartheid's Language Boards was taken over by a number of language planning bodies coordinated by the Pan South

African Language Board (PanSALB).[1] In recent years, various projects (e.g. PRAESA, Translate.org.za, Rhodes SANTED programme) have sprung up to spearhead the development and implementation of terminology in the African languages (see Mahlalela-Thusi and Heugh, 2002; Van Huysteen, 2003; Sam, Dalvit and Machula, 2008). These combined efforts have led to the collection and/or development of a considerable amount of technical terminology in various areas, ranging from Health Sciences to Information Communication Technology (ICT).

According to Van Huyssteen (2003), the most common strategies of word creation in African languages are compounding, derivation and borrowing. IsiXhosa, like many other African languages, is a very descriptive and idiomatic language. This makes it easy to create new words by combining existing ones. This strategy for word creation is called compounding. New technical terms created in this way are arguably very suggestive to native speakers, as they link to the existing semantic clouds of related words. An example in English would be *washing powder*, which has got clear semantic links with *washing machine* and *washing line,* but also shares some characteristics with *cocoa powder* and *gun powder.* A rather famous example of an isiXhosa compound is *umabonakude* (literally 'you can see things from far') which means 'television'.

The morphology of isiXhosa makes the creation of words by derivation easy. For example, the root '-ntu' can be found with a combination of prefixes such as *abantu* (meaning 'people'), *oluntu* (meaning 'community') and *ubuntu* (meaning 'humanity'). The common root makes the semantic relationship between these words immediately clear. Halliday and Martin (1993) note how a similar characteristic in Chinese support scientific discourse, whenever scientific classification corresponds to commonsensical one. An example with English would be 'berry'. For a native speaker of English, it is immediately clear that 'blackberry', 'blueberry', 'strawberry' etc. belong to the same class of things, i.e. berries. Halliday and Martin, however, warn that this type of inferences might be misleading when commonsensical taxonomies do not reflect the scientific ones, as is often the case in health sciences, for instance.

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The Pan South African Language Board (PanSALB) is a Subcommittee of the Senate concerned with the protection of linguistic diversity and language rights. It functions both as a watchdog on the implementation of language policy and as an advisory body for the government.

In terms of strategies to create new words, African languages are following the same path as other languages (see Pulcini, 1995 for an example with Italian). More and more English borrowings are used, especially in the scientific and technological field (Pluddeman, Mati, Mahlalela-Thusi, 2000; Setati *et al.*, 2002), This can allow for the lexicon to grow very fast, in the same way the English lexicon grew by borrowing existing scientific and technical terms from other languages. If one considers English borrowings as part of the lexicon instead of examples of code-switching, isiXhosa seems to be already suitable for scientific and technological discourse.

IsiXhosa seems to offer flexibility in integrating words from other languages (especially English and Afrikaans). Unlike English, where words of Greek and Latin origin are marked by their suffixes (e.g. -logy, -ism etc.) and follow their own morphological rules, in isiXhosa most borrowings are fitted into existing noun classes (mostly classes nine and ten), usually with some orthographic adaptation (e.g. *idesika* – 'desk', *iidesika* – 'desks'). This seems to allow for a more harmonious integration of borrowings into the existing grammatical structures.

Many language developers as well as common speakers of African languages have negative attitudes towards code-switching (see Finlayson and Madiba, 2002). This phenomenon, called *language purism,* might be a legacy of apartheid's ideology, in which languages were an integral part of separate and 'pure' cultural and social identities (see Webb and Kembo-Sure, 2000 Kamwangamalu, 2001). This might still be reflected in the curriculum and passed on to students in classroom teaching of the African languages today (Barkhuizen, 2001). Madiba (2001, p.74) stresses the communicative value of language and advocates a pragmatic approach, which "has the capacity to open up the African languages for new terms through borrowing and at the same time, to enable non-specialists to understand the relevant concepts as they are designated by indigenous terms of their languages".

Extrinsic arguments

Extrinsic arguments refer to 'what a language *has*', i.e. the resources associated with it. These can be either immaterial resources (e.g. teachers, knowledge) or material resources (e.g. books and teaching material). The issue of costs associated with developing and implementing such resources is crucial to the debate.

Immaterial resources

From the point of view of immaterial (human) resources, the use of African languages in education offers a clear advantage compared to English: many teachers in South African schools are speakers of an African language. Conversely, Webb (1996) doubts that there are enough teachers who are sufficiently proficient in English to teach it as a second language let alone using it as LoLT. Whether this is the case or not, African languages are informally used as additional media of instruction in education (Heugh, 2000; Setati and Adler, 2002).

It would arguably be possible to formalise this situation and re-train teachers to use code-switching between English and the students' mother tongue as an effective educational tool. Formalising code-switching seems to be a more viable solution than attempting to get teachers and students who share the same first language to communicate in a second language they are not fully proficient in (see also Simango, 2009). This claim is supported by the fact that, in spite of the considerable pressures to use English as the sole LoLT, this is not actually happening in the classroom.

The use of English gives access to a large body of international knowledge. As noted by Alexander (1995), however, exposure to and uncritical assimilation of knowledge produced internationally might lead to cultural dependency as well as misconception of the peculiarity of the South African context. In the words of this author:

> We have to be wary of any simple transplanting of the orthodox multicultural paradigm from European and North American theories of plural societies. In South Africa, the sim-plistic adoption or implementation of such theories, under present conditions, tends to revive and to reinforce Apartheid structures and patterns (p.40).

Knowledge relevant to the African context must be made available in a language the majority of African people understand. Simango (2009) argues that there are enough African scholars to produce knowledge in African languages. Wa Thiong'o (2003) notes that the knowledge produced by such scholars, if written in English, is unaccessible to masses of Africans.

Material resources

Retaining English as the main LoLT allows for the use of the existing material

resources in English and saves the costs of developing resources in African languages (Titlestadt, 1996; see also Mgqwashu, 2004). A possible critique to this point of view is that creating new and culturally-appropriate material for speakers of an African language might be more efficient than clinging on to existing resources.

Existing resources seem to be ill-suited to the South African context. The English teaching materials currently used are not necessarily culturally appropriate, while subject experts with good English proficiency do not necessarily have the appropriate linguistic and cultural understanding for all learning contexts (Annamalai, Jernudd and Rubin, 1986; Alexander 2001). A similar critique could be levied to the suggestion by Mahlalela-Thusi and Heugh (2002) that teaching material and technical terminology could be revived from the first phase of Bantu Education. These teaching resources were shaped by apartheid ideology and would need to be extensively revisited.

Language issues are partly responsible for the current drop-out rate of above 70 per cent (and for the relative costs) in primary and secondary school in the townships and rural areas. A document by the CHE (2001) suggests that the language-medium issue is probably one of the factors determining the unacceptably low pass rate at tertiary level and argues that the present situation would be unsustainable if real cost effectiveness were taken into account. Research commissioned by the World Bank indicates that developing material and training teachers for multilingual education in South Africa would imply a very small increase on the education budget (Heugh, 2000).

While the current model appears to be disfunctional, a more extensive use of African languages as LoLT could have beneficial effects on education and society at large. Such benefits are difficult to gauge at the present stage. As an example, Alexander (2001) suggests that investments in multilingual education would support the development of an African languages industry, with positive spin-offs for a previously disadvantaged segment of the population.

In a country characterised by unresolved tensions fuelled by unequal distribution of resources, dedicating resources to the promotion of African languages could allow a wider section of the population to become part of the productive cycle (Hinton, 2001). Wright (2007) notes that some scholars might support the development and use of African languages to defend 'project funding and personal career trajectories'. Likewise, one could argue that African academics who have mastered English proficiency might

advocate its use in order to entrench their position and distance themselves from the mass of speakers of an African language.

Functional argument

Functional arguments refer to 'what a language *does*', i.e. its functions in a given society and the resources it gives access to. In this section we discuss the instrumental as well as the symbolic value of isiXhosa in South Africa.

Instrumental value of language

In order to address practical issues connected with the use of 11 official languages, Alexander (2001) proposes to develop a Common Sotho and a Common Nguni. These could be easily spoken and understood by speakers of languages in the Sotho and Nguni families respectively. This would cut the number of official languages from 11 to 6, thus increasing efficiency and cost-effectiveness. The flip side of the coin is that it would flatten some of the linguistic diversity of the country and further marginalise smaller languages such as Xitsonga and Tshivenda.

A possible alternative would be to promote mutual learning and use of languages within the same family. For instance, isiXhosa is mutually intelligible with other Nguni languages (Alexander, 2001). It is therefore understood (or arguably easy to learn) for almost half of the South African population. In the educational context, this means that materials could be exchanged, thus cutting costs.

The issue of multilingual classes, though pertinent mainly to Gauteng, features prominently in the debate. A possible explanation is that, because of its presence in the media and since it is the economic engine of the country, Gauteng is often considered a reference point for the rest of South Africa. One might argue that, because of historical reasons, most classrooms in the rest of the country are linguistically homogeneous; students who do not speak the local African language are usually under considerable social pressure to learn it. A second, possibly more plausible explanation is that multilingual classrooms exemplify an ideological construction of the language issue which, for historical reasons, is still very strong.

Symbolic value of language

Webb and Kembo-Sure (2000) observe that the use of language as a marker of social identity is far less common and weaker in Africa than it is, for instance, in Europe. In South Africa, however, the association between language and social identity is very strong as a consequence of past policies. Herbert (1992) argues that, during apartheid, language identification was encouraged and language borders were enforced in order to keep different communities separate and, possibly, divided.

The recognition of official status to African languages in the homelands and mother tongue education were part of a strategy to reinforce identification with one's language. Language was the main criteria according to which different groups of black people were divided and often put in competition with each other (for jobs in the mines, for instance). This favoured the apartheid policy of divide-and-rule. The process through which languages in South African have acquired strong political connotations and strong ideological and symbolic value as markers of social identity is discussed by Webb and Kembo-Sure (2000). This phenomenon can cause linguistic intolerance and may lead to future conflicts.

The politicised nature of South African languages makes it difficult to discuss issues such as mother-tongue education, which in the mind of most speakers of an African language is associated with the divisive policies of the past. Since most classes, especially at tertiary level, are multilingual, support for any African language as LoLT might be interpreted as giving speakers of that language an unfair advantage. Research on language attitudes at tertiary level (Dyers, 1998; Dalvit, 2004) suggests that this might be one of the main arguments against the use of African languages in the educational context, even in linguistically homogenous situations. This seems to suggest that such attitudes might be the result of an ideological construct as well as of practical considerations.

Ironically, attitudes among speakers of an African language entrench the dominant position of English, not so much as a neutral *lingua franca* but as equally unassailable by all speakers of an African language. This reinforces hierarchical language structures, with English (and to some extent Afrikaans) at the top and the African languages at the bottom.

In spite of the ideologically constructed view that the use of English promotes

linguistic equality among African languages, they enjoy different status according to the number and influence of their speakers. IsiXhosa comes second only to isiZulu in terms of number of speakers among the 11 official South African languages. IsiXhosa-speaking Transkei is considered the historical cradle of the African National Congress, and many prominent figures in the struggle (Nelson Mandela, Steve Biko, Govan Mbeki, Robert Sibukwe, and Oliver Thambo) were isiXhosa speakers. Thabo Mbeki was also a speaker of isiXhosa, and so were the majority of members of cabinet. This led to suspicions that isiXhosa speakers might be building a powerful lobby around ethnic affiliation, in what has been called a Xhosa *nostra* (*Daily Dispatch*, 18 May 2002). The issue gained prominence in the media during the race with current president Jacob Zuma, an isiZulu speaker. This supports the fear of rising interlinguistic tensions, envisaged by Herbert (1992) as a possible consequence of his politicisation of the South African languages.

Conclusions

In response to our own question, English can and definitely should be used in the education of African students in South Africa. Its dominant role, however, is symptomatic of hegemonic structures which, we feel, need to be deconstructed. From the ideological point of view, it hampers the process of social transformation in the education system, by *de facto* entrenching an official language policy which was designed to disempower speakers of an African language.

From the practical point of view, the current English-mainly model adopted in most rural and township schools does not seem to produce educational excellence or English proficiency. African languages, though still in the process of being developed, are linguistically equal to English. They can rely on material resources which are culturally appropriate and on immaterial resources (i.e. teachers) which are already in place. Transformation of the educational system to make a more extensive use of African languages is relatively cost effective, if compared with the cost of the currently inefficient system. The fear that a more extensive use of African languages would fuel tensions seems to be motivated by ideological constructs inherited form apartheid rather than practical considerations.

In summary, we feel that the cause of bilingual education in South Africa needs to gain a new momentum. Both on the practical and on the ideological

level, this would better reflect the reality of the new society promised after the end of apartheid. Language in education remains a crucial issue to address in the transformation of the currently dysfunctional education system.

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